

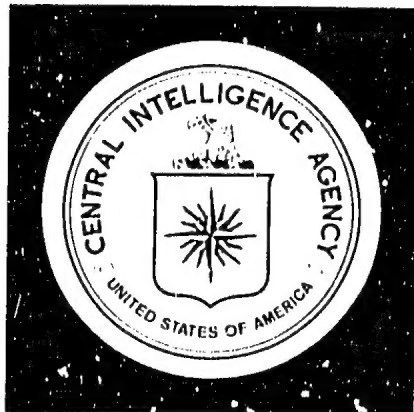
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Developments in Indochina

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DEVELOPMENTS IN INDOCHINA

(Information as of 1500)

LAOS

The Communists are again increasing the pressure on the provincial capital at Saravane in south Laos.

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SOUTH VIETNAM

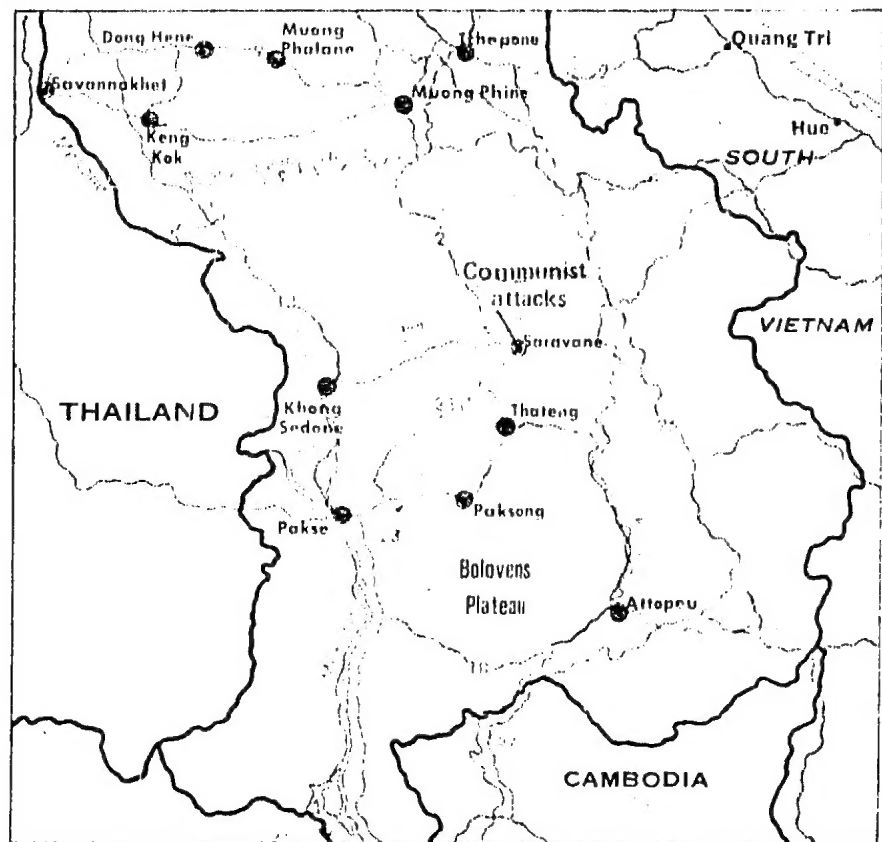
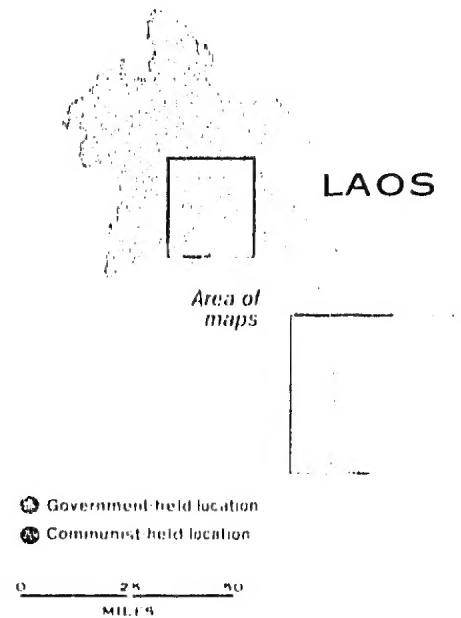
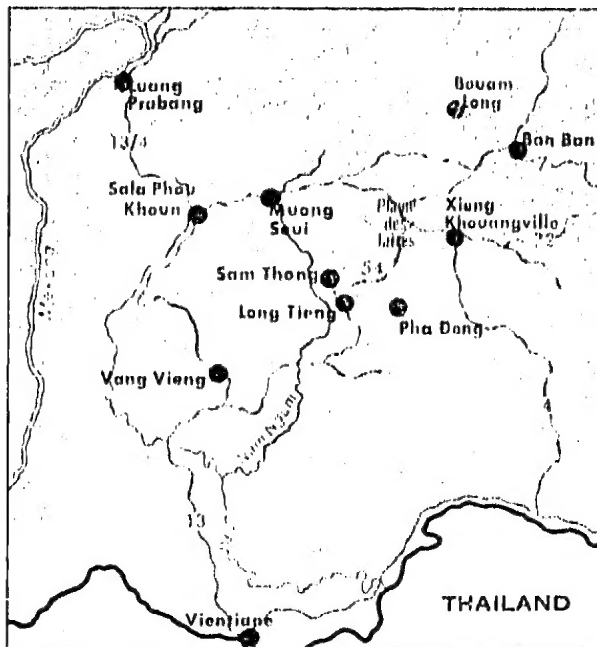
South Vietnam's Catholics are trying to organize a new party to compete politically with President Thieu's new Democracy Party. The government has made some changes in judicial procedures in anticipation of a cease-fire.

CAMBODIA

Khmer Communist forces are continuing to harass scattered government positions along Routes 2 and 3 and in the Phnom Penh area.

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LAOS

Communist forces in south Laos are again increasing pressure on Saravane.

In their sharpest attacks in several weeks, North Vietnamese gunners carried out a series of heavy shellings against irregular positions south and southeast of the town. Although ground action has remained generally light, several Communist tanks were sighted on Saravane's western edge on 7 January. Irregular troops appear to be standing up well, and their combat effectiveness reportedly is still high. They have been receiving effective air support despite enemy antiaircraft fire. Elements of the North Vietnamese 968th Division's three regiments are now in the vicinity of Saravane.

In the north, no significant military activity was reported over the weekend. Irregular forces north of the Plaine des Jarres at Bouam Long are taking advantage of a lull in Communist military action to strengthen their defenses and to increase their patrolling around the government base. Recent air strikes on an important supply line west of Bouam Long apparently have helped to slow the pace of the North Vietnamese offensive.

To the west, government forces assigned to retake the town of Sala Phou Khoun at the junction of Routes 7 and 13--which was overrun by Pathet Lao and "Patriotic Neutralist" troops on 30 December--are still trying to get organized. US and Lao air strikes are being conducted on suspected enemy positions near the town. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma, who has been embarrassed politically and militarily by the Lao Army's poor

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showing in this sector, has named a single overall commander for the area to eliminate previous command and control problems.

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SOUTH VIETNAM

Some of South Vietnam's Catholics are preparing to form a new political party. Several Catholic factions presently allied informally in the People's Forward Together Bloc will try to merge soon and seek validation as a legal party under the tough new decree promulgated by President Thieu late last month.

Under the new law, parties must have chapters containing a minimum of five percent of the registered voters in at least half of South Vietnam's provinces and cities, and they must win a certain minimum percentage of either the vote or the seats at stake in elections for the National Assembly. Existing parties have three months to meet the new conditions; new parties have to comply within a year after they begin operating.

Indications that the new Catholic party, whose name is expected to be the "Freedom Party," was being formed were revealed publicly this weekend in the semi-official newspaper Tin Song. A "provisional executive committee," consisting of 15 members and led by three co-chairmen representing various Catholic factions, already has been formed, according to the news reports. Earlier in the week, some of the new party officials told the US Embassy that while an organization had not been fully set, a firm decision had been made to try to form a party under the requirements of the new decree.

The officials acknowledged to the embassy that an all-Catholic party would not be broad-based enough to last very long, but that for

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the immediate future they "must work with what they have now." Efforts apparently will be made at some future date to form an alliance with such other religious factions as the Hoa Hao in the delta and the Cao Dai in Tay Ninh Province. The officials also revealed that while they technically would have 12 months to get the new party in shape, the real test of their ability to organize a viable party would come in June when the political parties must present their slates of candidates for the Senate elections in August. Immediate efforts to get the party constituted in the required number of locations will be made in the smaller provinces and cities away from Saigon where there already is sufficient Catholic strength. Organization in such places as the capital, and other cities where the Catholics are not as strong, the officials stated, would come later.

The announcement of the Catholics' plans to organize a political party under the new decree is the first public indication of such an attempt by an organization other than that controlled by President Thieu, whose Democracy Party already is well on the road. The recent history of South Vietnam's Catholic movement, which has largely been factionalized and unable to line up behind any single leader or group of leaders, does not bode well for the new party's chances of survival. Attempts to get a solid "Catholic vote" have largely proved fruitless, the last known attempt at such a consolidation being the effort to form the People's Forward Together Bloc.

South Vietnam's two major religious sects--the Catholics and the Buddhists--would seem logical candidates for new political parties under the law, although there presently are no indications

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[redacted]

that the Buddhists plan such a move. Despite unsuccessful efforts in the past by both groups to organize politically, the "do or die" effect of the new decree law may furnish the necessary stimulus for success. Both sects have the necessary strength in terms of numbers--provided they can get some agreed upon position broad enough to satisfy a majority of their membership--to muster the required number of votes and provincial chapters. Money also should be no problem under those conditions. If, however, President Thieu decides to put the full weight of the government's bureaucracy against any new political organization, it will be doomed from the start. But with a minimum of government interference and considerable effort toward compromise on the part of the Catholics, the new "Freedom Party" could become a reality. [redacted]

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Some Changes in South Vietnamese Judicial Procedures

The South Vietnamese Government, anticipating a halt in the fighting and a possible cease-fire, has ordered that present arrest and detention procedures remain in effect under peacetime conditions. In a heretofore unannounced decree, President Thieu in late November broadened the government's detention law to include people considered dangerous to "public order." Previously, persons could be detained or their place of residence restricted only if they were considered "dangerous to national defense and security" during wartime conditions. The new and expanded provision now gives security officials the authority to arrest people after the war ends when threats to national defense and public security might be more difficult to prove.

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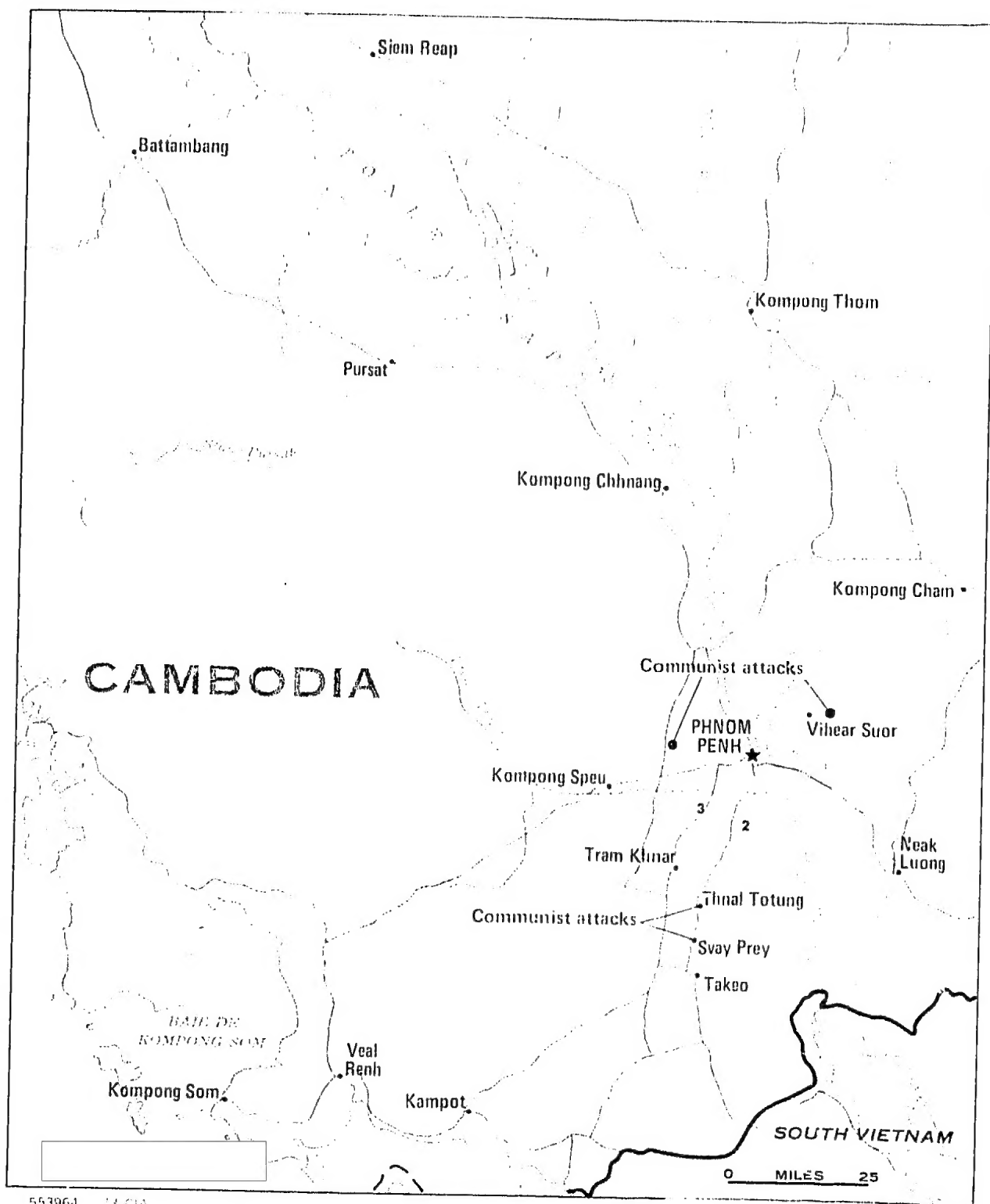
The new decree also orders that the offenders be arrested on criminal instead of political charges. Some earlier decrees already had ordered such changes for crimes covered by other laws in an effort to prevent the release of "political prisoners" after a cease-fire. The addition of such a provision in the detention law means that virtually any person arrested in South Vietnam can now be held on criminal instead of political charges.

In another move designed to strengthen the government's judicial hand, the prime minister recently ordered the end of an accelerated campaign to arrest Communist suspects under the government's anti - Viet Cong "Phuong Hoang" (Phoenix) program. Begun last spring shortly after the start of the enemy's offensive, the program permitted the arrest of persons suspected of working for the Viet Cong if only one source of evidence was presented against them; previously, three such sources were needed. Many of the several thousand people arrested under the new provision are still in jail because of the government's inability or unwillingness to prosecute the cases.

When it went into effect, the provision was criticized strongly by some groups, especially the An Quang Buddhists, who charged that the government was indiscriminately arresting their members. During the height of the fighting, these protests largely fell on deaf ears as the government took the position that such extreme measures were justified to reduce the internal threat posed by these people. As the fighting subsided and the threat to the government declined, this justification became less credible. Furthermore, local security officials began to complain that detention centers were becoming overcrowded.

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CAMBODIA

One of the three government battalions assigned to reinforce Tram Khnar on Route 3 managed to join the defenders of that town on 6 January. The other two battalions were forced back by Communist action, and one of them has moved east toward Route 2. Khmer Communist elements operating along that highway are continuing to harass government positions north of Takeo at Thnal Totung and Svay Prey. Some US air support is being provided to the two threatened positions.

Several scattered Communist attacks occurred in the Phnom Penh area over the weekend. A total of 46 Cambodian troops were wounded in one clash west of the capital, and the government has sent three infantry battalions and an armored personnel carrier squadron to reinforce its units in that area. East of the city, four government soldiers were killed and another 20 were wounded during a Communist attack on a Cambodian battalion operating near Vihear Suor.

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